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ABSTRACT

Vocational student organizations (VSOs) are an integrated part of the overall curricula in most educational institutions. Besides providing many educational and work experiences in the classroom, VSOs benefit faculties, school administrators, and communities. Within the classroom and in the workplace, VSOs put into practice those experiences that develop positive personal attitudes, develop an appreciation of work ethics and productivity, and demonstrate the dignity of work. Faculty members and school administrators who participate in VSOs gain greater exposure to the work conditions and demands of business and industry. By participating in VSOs, educators can observe what technological training is missing in their vocational programs and consequently can take steps to ensure that their local VSOs either remain or become part of a more futurist-oriented educational society by serving as a vehicle for student exposure to and experiences with recent advances in high technology. (MN)

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Occasional Paper No. 94

THE ROLE OF STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

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FOREWORD

National student organizations have played vital roles in vocational education, often acting as bridges between the real world and the world inside the classroom, or providing extra emphasis to students in developing their personal and leadership skills as well as their vocationally related ones. This is the premise of Edward Miller's presentation, "The Role of Student Organizations in Vocational Education" delivered to the National Center staff on May 5, 1983. Edward Miller is well suited to addressing these and other roles of national vocational student organizations in vocational education, as he is President and Chief Executive Officer of the Future Business Leaders of America-Phi Beta Lambda, Inc. (FBLA-PBL).

Mr. Miller, an educator and businessman with an in-depth understanding of successful programs for young people that prepare them for business careers, is recognized as one of the nation's foremost authorities on student organizations in vocational education. He has headed FBLA-PBL for thirteen years and has helped make that association a pacesetter among student organizations. His recent appointment by President Reagan to chair the National Advisory Council on Vocational Education will further extend his areas of influence and provide that prestigious body with an expertise and leadership that is unique. Mr. Miller is, in addition, an active leader in a number of professional organizations.

The National Center is pleased to have Edward Miller deliver his presentation and prepare this occasional paper on "The Role of Student Organizations in Vocational Education."

Robert E. Taylor
Executive Director
The National Center for Research
in Vocational Education

THE ROLE OF STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

Student organizations, as we now know them in America (i.e., the officially recognized vocational student organizations), have actually evolved from what were once clubs. Those clubs became essential and strong forces within the education community. Today, vocational student organizations (VSOs) are an integrated part of the overall curricula in most educational institutions. They provide many educational and work experiences in the classroom and in the community. But the benefits of strong VSOs accrue not only to the students; they also are realized by faculties, school administrators, and communities.

Our free enterprise system requires continuous training and retraining of people to accomplish tasks that are created or refined as technology continues to change. Because the VSOs are usually involved in activities outside the school as well as in the classroom, they have the opportunity to stay abreast of these changes and often to anticipate the changing job-related requirements. Thus, the VSOs can better prepare their members for the movement into the adult work world.

Statistics from the U.S. Department of Labor show that 80 percent of the jobs available today are with small businesses. Only 20 percent of the job force today is with big business and industry. Small businesses, as we well know, cannot afford to train and retrain their workers constantly. A VSO provides its members with experiences that are extensions of their technical skills and provides greater exposure to more types of work and work place situations, so that businesses need not worry as much about retraining. Businesses need not worry as much about initial training when student employees are equipped with the work skills and motivation most employers seek. Retraining of such employees is easier because they are flexible and adept at applying their skills to new situations.

In the March, 1983, edition of *INC.* magazine, Milton Stewart writes about the need for a national commitment to modernize our skills as well as our industries. Stewart bases much of his thinking on what he considers the two most critical problems facing American business—unemployment and intensifying competition from abroad. According to Stewart, a necessary part of the solution for both problems is upgrading labor force skills.

Getting the job done, Stewart believes, will take at least three major steps. First—and the hardest of all—there must be a clearer national commitment. Second, both employers and employees must recognize that not only machines become obsolete, but also attitudes, institutions, and skills. Third, Americans and their leaders must anticipate a faster pace of often profound change for the rest of their lives. His crucial point is that education and training programs must assume leadership for continual retraining. Every American will need to learn how to do more than one inevitably replaceable job.

VSOs provide an important bridge between the real world and the world inside the classroom. Student members interact with business through the activities and programs of the associations. Professional and career people representing their specific disciplines are easily incorporated into projects and activities with these young people.

One of the primary objectives of the Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA) is to stay in touch with the nation's businesses. The members become involved in the businesses in their communities. They not only obtain experience through this program, they also contribute to the local businesses and observe the current needs of the marketplace, thus anticipating future educational requirements to meet those needs. Through feedback to other members, teachers, advisors, and the FBLA, members can stimulate change in the educational and training programs in their schools.

The same kinds of opportunity exist in the other VSOs. The greatest challenge of the VSOs is making certain that community leaders, educators, parents, and advisors are ready to listen, evaluate, and initiate training and educational changes necessary to prepare young people properly.

VSOs, as they exist in the nation today, provide the members with many additional benefits usually germane to regular classroom course work. Most classroom work does not concentrate on personal development, leadership, and interpersonal skills; the VSOs' activities do.

Within the classroom and in the community or work place, VSOs not only stress but also put into practice those experiences that develop positive personal attitudes, develop an appreciation of work ethics and productivity, and demonstrate the dignity of work. VSOs also give students the opportunity to become more active in their community, because they are encouraged to participate in work and educational situations outside the classroom. This early contact with the real world of business better prepares students to bridge that gap from classroom to work place.

Faculty and school administrators also benefit from the unique opportunities presented by VSOs. Faculty members who serve as advisors or who participate in VSO activities gain greater exposure to the conditions and demands of business or industry. They become aware of what students face when they complete their schooling. In many cases, such faculty are better able to anticipate the future needs of the job market and prepare their students accordingly.

Vocational students who interact with the community through work-related charitable, conservation, or beautification projects act as ambassadors for the school and its administrators. These students represent their school in a positive, responsible way, because they are willing and eager to become involved in their community.

Of course, one can easily see how the community benefits, as well. The students provide a reservoir of talent and enthusiasm that can be tapped for community projects, and they act as an interface among the community, business leaders, and the school's entire student body. In the long term, however, the VSOs benefit the community most by providing a source of workers who understand the problems facing particular businesses and careers. Such workers are sympathetic to business and its goals and have been exposed to and understand the ethics required in good business. They and the community benefit, whether they become homemakers, mechanics, bank presidents, office or production workers, or farmers.

Those are the basic benefits of VSOs. But these student organizations also have responsibilities to their schools, advisors, communities, and work places. It is not enough, by any means, for vocational education merely to keep abreast of the skills required today. Vocational education must always look as far ahead as possible and anticipate the future needs of students and of the marketplace. Much talk today centers around the technological revolution. But high technology is more of an evolutionary than a revolutionary process, and the VSOs can do a great deal in making students' acquisition of high-technology skills a little easier. Because students are involved in the business place and in the community through their active participation in the VSOs, they have the opportunity to observe the impact that high technology is making.

Changes in technology not only alter the work place requirements, but also require new and innovative teaching approaches and methods. We have all been exposed to the increasing use of computers in the classroom, in business, and now even at home. It is no longer acceptable to teach students only how to use a calculator for basic accounting; they must be introduced to the use of the computer. Even the typewriter must be related to the electronic office, where word processing, programming, and teleconferencing are part of today's normal, everyday business activities.

A recent article in *USA Today* had a headline that read, "Atari Hopes to Change Our Lives." Anyone who has teenagers in the house knows that Atari has already changed our lives to a great extent. In fact, I would rephrase the headline to read "Technology Will Change Our Lives." The changes that have occurred in the past are really minute compared to those that face us almost every new day.

After reading the article, I was momentarily stunned by the realization that the way I was taught, the skills that I had developed, and the application of those skills are now antiquated. When I was in secondary school, neither the teachers nor the students could have anticipated the incredible technological changes that would occur. And although educators cannot pretend to be seers, we can avoid becoming set in our ways, and we can avoid being resistant to change. We can learn to anticipate the educational and vocational needs of students next year, and of at least a few years down the road.

VSOs can be a vital part of a more futurist-oriented educational society. VSO members can observe what technological training is missing in their vocational areas. They can anticipate the technological training needs of tomorrow, because they deal with the vocation in a real, as well as an academic, setting. Their imaginations can be challenged. For example, what are the vocational education requirements for the homemaker of tomorrow, who will be operating his or her household enterprise through the use of electronics, computers, and robots? How is technology going to affect the planting and reaping of crops? How can currently employed people be retrained to utilize current and future technologies?

Because the VSOs exist to develop the whole person rather than only to teach a skill or trade, they are a resource with incredible potential. Students in the VSOs in America today, by the very fact that they are interested and enthusiastic enough to become members of student organizations, believe in their vocations. They are developing interpersonal skills and ethical positions and are beginning to assert their developing leadership abilities. They receive benefits from being members of the student organizations, and they provide guidance and encouragement for government policymakers, educators in their communities, and other organizations of students. VSOs can provide the means through which we aid our population in preparing for more than one inevitably replaceable job. Student members can and should be the people who move into responsible positions and who carry with them the attitude that obsolescence of education, training, and skills is not tolerable.

For the last year, I have had the privilege of serving as chairperson of the National Advisory Council on Vocational Education (NACVE). When President Reagan appointed me to that position, I realized that the council had both a great responsibility and a great opportunity to analyze and recommend programs that will set the tone and pace of vocational education for some years to come.

Last September, the council issued a policy statement endorsing the need for a continuing strong federal partnership role in reauthorization of the Vocational Education Act and for closer linkages among business, industry, and vocational education. In reviewing the past work of

NACVE, I realize that a portion of NACVE's 1975 policy statement is unfortunately still true. In 1975, NACVE said:

> America is rapidly losing the technical superiority that has been the base of our prosperity and our proudest export. Our competitive position in world markets was built on the superb technical skills and productivity of our people. We are losing that edge and we must reclaim it.

Eight years have passed since the statement was published. A great deal has been accomplished through our vocational education programs and through our student organizations in vocational education to try to reclaim America's edge in technical skills and productivity. The student organizations and the vocational education programs continue to make progress in placing American workers on the cutting edge of current and future technical skill requirements. It can be done, and it will be done, through the concerted and coordinated efforts of government, education, American business and industry, and VSOs.

Vocational student organizations are aware that they play a very critical role in helping to prepare students now for vocations of tomorrow. They do not take this stewardship lightly. They will continue to meet the challenge to prepare their members to assume meaningful roles in their vocational areas and to do so with realization that they must be ready for and anticipate changes both in the work place and in the skills required to maintain that competitive edge. Active VSOs combined with creative approaches to skills training will prepare the students of today to meet these challenges of tomorrow.

NACVE is currently holding five major forums in Dallas, Atlanta, San Francisco, Chicago, and Boston. The purpose of these forums is to listen to business, industry, and labor tell how they see the role of vocational education in producing trained workers they can use. One of the common threads that is coming through, loudly and clearly, in more than seventy testimonies already received is that business, industry, and labor want to see vocational education produce not just employees who have specific skills, but workers who have good attitudes toward work, believe in the work ethic, and who are strong believers in the system. As the chief executive officer of a student organization that believes a necessary part of our program is to instill these things, I listen very carefully to what industry is saying. There are very few (if any) other ways to bring these elements to students' education than through a vocational student organization.

As we have an opportunity to listen to these representatives of business, industry, and labor, we can see one other common thread; that is, the vocational student organizations are, without question, producing ambassadors and advocates of the vocational training program like none other.

Every vocational educator should take advantage of an opportunity to participate in some program of VSO activities. In no other way can we learn more about it or understand it better than to be involved in it. If and when that invitation comes to you from any VSO member, please accept it. Agree to work with them, to mingle with them, and understand their programs and what they are providing. They will benefit from your participation with them, but you will benefit equally from seeing what VSOs are doing for their members and their communities.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Edward D. Miller

Question: Motivation and ethical attitudes cannot be created in a vacuum. Do you have confidence that those things might arise in a fairly natural fashion through VSO activities? Will being members of a VSO make students believe that they have an opportunity—that the system, in fact, will offer them stable employment and a quality work life?

I think VSOs create more of an opportunity for students to develop motivation and good work ethics than just being out in the work place. Being part of a VSO program also involves students in more than just being in the school, because they have the opportunity to hear from others besides their teachers and friends on the campus or high school campus area.

Question: I would be interested in your comments and reactions on the recent report from the National Commission on Excellence in Education, which indicates that students need to spend more time in the school, need more homework, and need to have longer school days to create a better academic environment.

I am a former educator and administrator in public school; I taught for twelve years, was a school administrator for three years, and, on the state level, was supervisor for another three years before going into association management. So I am no stranger to the problems and challenges of public education.

I was with President Reagan when he received the report from the commission, and I have had an opportunity to read it several times over. I feel very strongly that the report is accurate.

When I left the public school system in the mid-1960s, I left because I saw a deterioration of discipline on the junior high campuses as well as in high schools at that time. I saw the learning atmosphere disappearing before my eyes. Perhaps I was a disciplinarian; I ran a tight ship. I still feel that to learn there must be a learning atmosphere. And unfortunately, in those times of the 1960s, there was not that kind of support from the higher echelons. I feel that the disintegration of the learning process began at that time, and I agree with the report that, yes, there first must be a new and appropriate learning atmosphere within the school. There has to be more discipline. There should be more incentive for good teachers' salaries. There should be upgraded training for teachers.

Now you may wonder whether having a longer school day will mean less emphasis on nonclassroom activity. I don't think so. It would not leave out vocational student organizations, because the VSOs are a part of that classroom activity, though they have laboratory parts outside the classroom, too. I do not feel that the report's recommendations will mean less emphasis on student organizations. I think we will see possibly more emphasis because of the benefits that VSOs provide.

Question: In terms of the Commission on Excellence report, there could very well be less emphasis upon VSOs if there is less emphasis upon the vocational programs that provide the settings and opportunities for these student youth organizations. And while I concur with the general goals of the report, I am not sure that its recommendations reach toward the solution. It may be that we will see less emphasis on and fewer opportunities for vocational education, in order to achieve the report's emphasis upon academic education.

That's very true. In reading the report, you of course observed that there was little or no mention of vocational education. That's a big mistake. The National Advisory Council on Vocational Education is bringing this to the attention of members of the commission; in fact, I already have, and a member of the commission will be at our upcoming NACVE meeting. I have invited her to tell us why vocational education was omitted from the report. We should have some interesting reactions there. If the results are indeed as you say they may be, then we would certainly see a problem area for student organizations. I do not believe that will be the case, though.

Question: You call for a new and appropriate learning environment. Could you clarify what you mean by that?

I envision a learning environment that does not confine students' learning within the four walls of the classroom, but in which students have the opportunity to be a part of the outside world, which they'll be joining as employees. More emphasis may be given in this area through the vocational student organizations, which create that environment as an integral part of their educational programs.

Question: What are the current major issues facing the National Advisory Council for Vocational Education? Will the council be doing a report?

The major issue right now is the fate of vocational education in America. Members of the council are working through the nationwide forums to develop relationships with business, industry, and labor, as I've just discussed. This is one way we hope to gain the understanding and material to develop a useful report. And we hope to have strong support for the reauthorization of vocational education when the five forums are completed.

Question: Will the Council publish a special report synthesizing these forum findings?

Most assuredly, and I hope with as little time lapse as possible. We hope to have a published report for many reasons, and the sooner the better. We need it for our support of the reauthorization, and we'll need it for the programs that we will try to support.

Question: You said in your speech that you felt vocational student organizations had a strong role in helping turn out students who believe in the work ethic and who believe in "the system." Would you comment on what you think is the role of vocational student organizations in turning out students with the self-awareness and critical insight to critique the system, to create new kinds of relationships with work, and ultimately to improve "the system."

Of course, we want our students to be thinkers. We need to create more thinkers and movers, and if our VSO programs can indeed motivate and stimulate the interest and personal dedication needed to be a good leader, that is tremendous. Students who are in a vocational student organization are guided to channel their interests and to develop dedication to the work ethics and to the programs with which they are involved.

Of course, not all of our members are going to become leaders in vocational student organizations, but they're going to be good dedicated coworkers even if they're not leaders. But VSO activities can at the same time encourage them to see where positive change can be made, and put that change into action.

Question: Would you please tell us what vocational student organizations have done for special needs students?

Certainly. All of the major vocational student organizations, as they are recognized by the U.S. Department of Education, have as part of their program the mandate to meet the needs of special populations. I can't go down the list of what each VSO does specifically, but all of us have programs to meet those needs. In my own organization, we have a special program for the deaf. We have signing in our competitive events on the national level and encourage it on the state level for the state events. I think we're one of the few VSOs that has had our national handbook translated into Spanish for our Spanish-speaking members, of whom we have a large number. We have tried to make special provisions to accommodate the needs of the special populations, not just in our competitive events, but also in the programs and activities that are offered on the local and state levels.

Question: Do you know of any studies that have evaluated the effects of vocational student organizations?

Unfortunately, there have not been any, to my knowledge. I have seen a few dissertations addressing the topic, but I frankly feel that they have fallen short. If there are such evaluations and anybody knows about them, I would certainly welcome them on my desk.

Question: I have some comments that I would like you to discuss. As you pointed out, all teachers should be advisors of VSOs, but we do not have state plans that tell teachers that this is a part of their program. Neither are most teachers prepared to advise youth organizations as a method of teaching and learning. Second, I get greatly disappointed by the statistics that show that far less than 100 percent of the students participate in VSOs. Maybe VSOs ought to subscribe more nearly to meeting all the students' needs.

Number one, *some* state plans do call for the implementation of vocational student organizations in vocational programs in the respective disciplines.

Number two, you are so right; we have not scratched the surface in our membership versus total enrollment of vocational education. That is not to say, however, that we are not reaching more than our membership figures reflect. Although they may not be dues-paying members, many students are reached and influenced by the VSO programs. They cannot help but be influenced because the programs are becoming more and more integrated into the classroom activity in training programs. So the sphere of influence is widening, although that will never be reflected in our total membership figures. For example, FBLA (Future Business Leaders of America) will close out with nearly two-hundred-fifty-thousand members on our rolls, but I'm sure we're influencing a million students, because our teacher advisors in the organization are teaching the program in classrooms that are reaching that many people.

We know we are reaching out into the communities, though the other point of support that we certainly need more of is advocacy. We are receiving more of it than ever before from business, industry, and labor. Future Business Leaders, for example, presently is receiving more financial and human resource support than ever before in our history. This year we should reach

$1 million in total contributions from business and industry to support the programs that provide the benefits I've already discussed. So I think that our outside influence also is increasing.

Question: You've made reference in your speech to the motivational work ethic, the positive worker attitudes that business leaders want from education, primarily vocational education. I run into that consistently with business leaders myself. Perhaps we in vocational education have fallen a little short in addressing the work ethic while working to enhance other skills, and I'm sure there's room for improvement on our end in nurturing and developing positive work attitudes in future employees. But I think there is also a responsibility coming the other way, from business leaders, to develop a climate that maintains and enhances positive work attitudes and adds motivation once employees get there. Based upon my discussion with business leaders, they are falling quite short of that goal. They don't maintain or enhance positive work attitudes once the students enter the work world.

That's an interesting comment. I'm not going to debate it with you, but I think that you cannot take isolated cases and consider them to be the situation nationwide.

When we look at young people today in the work force, the first thing that comes to mind is teenagers flipping hamburgers at McDonald's, Wendy's, or the like. You're right in this case; there is not always a great effort on the part of the fast-service food industry to create a positive work atmosphere, because in that industry it is a pressure, pressure, push, push operation, and there is little time to develop workers' attitudes. If the students don't come in with a good work ethic, they are usually not going out with it.

Now I don't believe that that would hold as true in other industries. If you are talking about only entry-level positions, yes, maybe. But, based on my own observations, I would not be willing to make an across-the-board indictment of business and industry to the extent that I think you are suggesting.

Question: I would like to know what you see as the role and future of VSOs at the community college level and technical colleges, where the majority of students are part-time students who also work part-time or full-time, and where the average age today is twenty-nine or thirty.

I certainly see a future for VSOs in community colleges, and I see them at this time in a very important role, because again I think that every student in secondary, postsecondary, community college, or private educational institution needs something like a vocational student organization to relate to, to be a part of, and to be an extension of the learning.

Of course, one could argue, where are we going to get the time to put that into the daily routine? Number one, it has to become an integral part of the training program, and number two, there just has to be time available for the necessary experiences. If they are indeed as important as we say they are, then time will be there for them.

All of the vocational student organizations have formed an informal group called the National Coordinating Council for Vocational Student Organizations (NCCVSO) and we have discussed this point many times. Most of us are seeing increased enrollment in our organizations in the two-year postsecondary and collegiate divisions. That in itself is indicative of the need for VSOs and for what they provide in the way of opportunities that are not available in any other way. So I say, yes, VSOs have a future and a very important role in postsecondary education to provide that extension of the learning program.

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